

## John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963

IT was thoroughly characteristic of President Kennedy that, near the end of the speech he had prepared to deliver in Dallas on November 22, he had planned to express the hope, for America, "that we may exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint." And it was the ultimate irony, and the ultimate outrage, that this vigorous young mind, which truly loved wisdom and understood the constructive uses of restraint, was destroyed in an instant of senseless violence. As James Reston wrote in the *New York Times* of the following day, "somehow the worst in the nation had prevailed over the best. . . ." The event dramatizes tragically our responsibility (to use another favorite Kennedy word) to strengthen the educational and cultural counterforces against the strains of violence that do exist in our country.

Certainly such strengthening was important in President Kennedy's mind, and he had expected to say so in Dallas. "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other," he was going to say. "In a world of complex and continuing problems, in a world full of frustrations and irritations, America's leadership must be guided by the lights of learning and reason—or else those who confuse rhetoric with reality and the plausible with the

possible will gain the popular ascendancy with their seemingly swift and simple answers. . . ." Adopting a phrase from Adlai Stevenson, he planned to say, "We cannot expect that everyone, to use the phrase of a decade ago, will 'talk sense to the American people.' But we can hope that fewer people will listen to nonsense. . . . The status of our strength and our security . . . clearly calls for the most responsible leadership and the most enlightened products of scholarship. . . ."

Similarly, on February 20, 1961, in a message to Congress about education, the President declared that "the human mind is our fundamental resource," and accordingly he pleaded for a full recognition of the appalling educational needs of the country and for adequate Federal action to meet those needs. The Kennedy brand of idealism never stopped with a theory; it was always linked to hard, tangible realities. Thus, education and Federal educational funds could not, in his practical mind, be thought of as frills or luxuries, but as necessities to the nation's survival. We can only hope that the Congress will yet be brought to see the problem in this light.

In the same way, President Kennedy—  
(continued on page 36)



*I hold every man a debtor to his profession, from the which, as men of course do seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavor themselves, by way of amends, to be a help and ornament thereunto.* BACON

(continued from page 17)

better than many a professional spokesman for the arts and letters, and far better than most statesmen—understood that the nation's creative life is no mere ornament but is fundamental to the country's strength and provides the measure of its spirit.

How deeply he believed this was evidenced repeatedly and in varied ways—in his speeches and his historical writings, in legislative proposals, in cultural programs at the White House, in his support of tax relief for authors and artists. He expressed his feeling with particular force in his recent address at Amherst College, honoring the memory of Robert Frost. In this address, given October 26 and recorded by the *New York Times* from ABC radio, he referred to the late poet as one "whose contribution was not to our size, but to our spirit; not to our political beliefs, but to our insight; not to our self-esteem, but to our self-comprehension."

Then the President went on to say what he believed about the relation between the inquiring mind and the strength of America, and between the artist and the world in which he lives.

"The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested. For they determine whether we use power or power uses us. Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. . . .

"When power leads men toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of men's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his experience. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.

"For art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstones of our judgment. The artist . . . faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an offensive state.

"The great artist is thus a solitary figure. He has, as Frost said, 'a lover's quarrel with the world.' In pursuing his perceptions of reality he must often sail against the current of his time. This is not a popular role. . . .

"I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him. . . . In free society art is not a weapon and it does not belong to the sphere of polemics and ideology. Artists are not engineers of the soul.

"It may be different elsewhere, but [in] democratic society, the highest duty of the writer, the composer, the artist is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may.

"In serving his vision of the truth, the artist best serves the nation. And the nation which disdains the mission of art invites the fate of Robert Frost's hired man—the fate of having nothing to look backward to with pride and nothing to look forward to with hope."

"I look forward to a great future for America—a future in which our country will match its military strength with our moral restraint, its wealth with our wisdom, its power with our purpose.

"I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty, which will protect the beauty of our natural environment, which will preserve the great old American houses and squares and parks of our national past, and which will build handsome and balanced cities for our future.

"I look forward to an America which will reward achievement in the arts as we reward achievements in business or statecraft.

"I look forward to an America which will steadily raise the standards of artistic accomplishment and which will steadily enlarge cultural opportunities for all of our citizens.

"And I look forward to an America which commands respect throughout the world not only for its strength but for its civilization as a whole. . . ."